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Goldstein

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non-show-biz friends rushed over to vent and complain, saying in essence that film is a stinker. Several reported that theatergoers were giggling during the film's final half-hour. As New York magazine's Peter Rainer, who gave the film a largely negative review, put it: "People I talked to didn't just say they disliked the film. They hated it."

Rank-and-file moviegoer sentiment was captured best in a letter to the editor that ran in Calendar 10 days ago in which Michael Indritzi of Silver Lake said: "Forget about nonexistent movie critics—'A.I.' could be the biggest scam ever put upon the general public by the entertainment industry. This film is horrible!"

The box-office grosses have reflected this indignant reaction. The movie had a solid opening weekend. But it dropped more than 50% in its second weekend and a disastrous 63% in its third: the film has grossed about $70.1 million so far. Bad buzz spreads fast. If nothing else, "A.I." has the distinction of being the first Spielberg movie to be generally beloved by critics but generally loathed by the public.

The critics' embrace of the film raises several intriguing questions. Is our aging critical elite terminally out of touch with regular moviegoers? Were their critical antennae overwhelmed by the one-two punch of Spielberg and Kubrick? Or were they simply grading on a curve, giving "A.I." high marks simply because it was one of the few movies this year that had higher aspirations than putting fannies into the seats? If I were a critic today, I'd certainly be a sucker for a film with some flesh on the bone. Today's reviewers see so much sleep that it's almost inevitable that they overpraise the few movies that exhibit even a whiff of heft or ambition. A movie critic today must feel like the restaurant reviewer who's been forced to spend months munching on French fries and cheeseburgers at McDonald's. When someone finally takes them to a decent neighborhood cafe, they go nuts.

"It's been a horrible six months, full of unmitigated dreck," says People magazine critic Leah Rozen. "So when you have a movie aimed at adults, instead of 13-year-olds, you're thankful for small blessings. Even if it's problematic, you're going to be respectful because you say, 'It made me think, there was substance and subtext, there was something to talk about.' "

"A.I." certainly offered plenty for critics to talk about, especially the striking contrast between the two cinema giants' divergent sensibilities. In Ansen's review, Kubrick was mentioned eight times to Spielberg's 10, not bad for a guy who didn't even get a writing credit. "For critics, the draw was the relationship between Kubrick and Spielberg," says Rainer. "But for the average moviegoer, the draw was Spielberg. Knowing the story was a futuristic fantasy about a child, his fans were looking for the guy who made 'E.T.' and they felt gypped when he didn't deliver what they'd expected."

The past decade has been rough on critics. Except for a brief moment in the spotlight at Oscar time, they've become marginalized by studio marketing that bypasses serious critics in favor of TV ads and pliant blurbmeisters. Most studio releases are geared to moviegoers about a quarter of the age of the fiftysomething men who dominate the critic elite. Morale has been low for some time. In 1997, Vanity Fair's James Wolcott described the New York critic cognoscenti shuffling into a screening room like "a prison work detail or refugees from the Russian front." He argued that the state of movie criticism had sunk as low as the movies themselves.

"Movie criticism has become a cultural malady, a group case of chronic depression and low self-esteem," he wrote. "The slump in morale reflects the shrinkage of prestige and clout in the field, but also seems rooted in a loss of romance at the very heart of the movie reviewing profession, a love gone flat."

In the '70s, the New Yorker's Pauline Kael was a tart-tongued goddess who could make a director's reputation with one bravura review—she launched Robert Altman's "Nashville" months before it was released, and it was her championing of "Bonnie and Clyde" that revived the film after a disastrous early launch. (God, bless her heart, dismissed Kubrick with the quip: "The only memorable character in his films of the past 20 years is Hal the computer.") But since her retirement in 1991, no one's filled her shoes. Film isn't the only arena in which critics have lost their wallop. The glory days of rock criticism were the late '60s and '70s when gunslingers like Lester Bangs and R. Meltzer ruled the roost, tossing firebombs at rock's most sacred cows. Today it's almost impossible to get less than three stars from the toothless crew that toils for Rolling Stone. It's been just as quiet on the theater front ever since New York Timesman Frank Rich, the much-feared Butcher of Broadway, left his critic's post for the op-ed pages.

Today, desperate to make their voices heard, critics either drown a movie in mounds of fawning flattery or don sackcloth and ashes, bemoaning the end of Western civilization every time they see a dim-bulb comedy or a sleazy thriller. In 1983, David Denby, then New York magazine's film critic, described Sly Stallone's "Staying Alive" as "no ordinary terrible movie; it's a vision of the end. As you watch it, the idea of what a movie is crumbles before your eyes." OK, David, but after that, what are you gonna say about "Tomb Raider"?

Yet critics remain suckers for their pet cinema gods, even after they're long past their prime. Martin Scorsese still gets gooey kid-glove treatment for dreary backwork like "Bringing Out the Dead," which the New York Observer's Andrew Sarris hailed as "a cinch to be on lists of the best films of the year." (It wasn't.)

If you think reviewers were bamboozled by "A.I." read the breathtaking blather with which critics greeted Kubrick's "Eyes Wide Shut," a chilly marital drama rejected by moviegoers once they recovered from the media hype over the Tom Cruise-Nicole Kidman sex scenes. Time magazine's Richard Schickel dubbed it "Kubrick's haunting final masterpiece." The New York Times' Janet Maslin gushed "This astonishing last film is a spellbinding addition to the Kubrick canon." Boy, if I'd had some teachers who graded on a curve like that in high school, I might have gotten into Harvard!

Most of today's leading critics came of age in the late '60s and '70s, at precisely the time when Hollywood movies were enjoying a brief golden age, fueled by bold Young Turks led by Francis Ford Coppola, Robert Altman, Arthur Penn, Roman Polanski, Scorsese and Hal Ashby. It was a time when movies had grand ambitions. It was also a time when audiences were far more supportive of daring filmmakers and darker, more challenging subject matter. Movies like "Chinatown," "Shampoo" and "Nashville" were box-office hits in the '70s. But with rare exceptions, such as "American Beauty," today's audiences prefer safe, less demanding fare. But part of being a critic is to have higher expectations.

And the critics who grew up under the spell of those films can't help but feel a deep yearning for the go-for-broke passion that's largely absent in today's films. Who could forget the thrill of seeing "The Wild Bunch" or "Mean Streets" for the first time—it's like trying to forget the first time you had sex. It's no coincidence that Kael's first book of reviews was called "I Lost It at the Movies."

Maybe that's why, in the end, I can't fault critics for occasionally giving a wet kiss to an aging heavyweight. They've got their standards and they're sticking to them, even though they're writing about a medium that sold its soul to the box-office devil long ago.

"The Big Picture" runs Tuesdays. If you have questions, ideas or criticism, e-mail them to patrick.goldstein@latimes.com.

Moviegoer Reaction Is Mixed for 'A.I.'

Response to the Spielberg film includes awe and revulsion.

By EMMANUELLE SOICHET
TIMES STAFF WRITER

"Steven Spielberg's new movie is—let me put this delicately—really, really bad. It's bad in almost every way," wrote John Podhoretz in the National Review, while Newsday's John Anderson asserted "A.I. Artificial Intelligence" is "easily the most fascinating, provocative and perplexing film to come out of Hollywood in years."

Like the movie they describe, reviews for "A.I." have been disjointed and conflicted, running the gamut from full-bodied praise to revulsion.

For the most part, mainstream critics welcomed the film as an "intellectually challenging" fairy tale. Many moviegoers' reactions range from merely satisfied to profoundly disappointed.

Entertainment Weekly found that 44% of 777 moviegoers polled online said, " 'A.I.' was worse than [they] expected," grading the film a B-minus, while professional critics averaged a B-plus. Of those responding to a Dallas Morning News review on the Internet, 27% gave the film a D or an F.

Some detractors complain that the narration and exposition are overdone, adding to the film's lethargic action over 2½ hours, while others were confused by what they describe as holes in the three-act storyline. The story itself is outdated, say critics, and is a compilation of tidbits from movies like "Blade Runner," "Bicentennial Man," "Tron," "Mad Max" and even "WaterWorld."

"It isn't cohesive. It feels like malt liquor mixed with fine wines," wrote "user54" on a DreamWorks message board. "It seems to me that the fans of this film seek to categorize [sic] the detractors as ignorant people who only want typical Hollywood fanfare. However, I dislike this film because it has way too much typical Hollywood in it."

Another posting contends, "Spielberg was trying too hard to please too many people. The movie was too maudlin to be anything but a kiddie film and [has] too many sexual references that were too revealing for a kids' film. I did not know whether to leave due to utter boredom, or stay just to test my stamina."

Movie critics focused on the film's contrasting styles, mapping out the on-screen interplay between the generally uplifting Spielbergian drama and the darker themes of the late Stanley Kubrick, who was the initial driving force behind the project.

The general consensus: " 'A.I.' is a collection of extremes that tend to cancel each other out," as Jeff Strickler of the Minneapolis Star-Tribune concluded.

Where that sits with moviegoers is unclear. "The basic problem I have with it is that it fails to be a Stanley Kubrick film, but it also fails to be a Steven Spielberg [sic] film," noted Josh Schreibman in a Kubrick discussion group on the Yahoo Internet site. Levon Parseghian of Torrance, a Kubrick fan who enjoyed the film, said "A.I." stayed close to its originator's style. "I kept saying throughout the film, 'It's gonna turn Spielberg now, it's gonna turn Spielberg,' but that never happened."

Newsday's Anderson concluded "A.I.'s" underlying themes would "be baffling audiences for the rest of the summer—possibly longer—and creating the kind of conversational vortex that consumes relationships the way the Flesh Fair chews up mechas."

"After walking out I didn't know what to think of the movie, but after having time to digest, it truly is a work of art," said one viewer on the Dallas poll. "I feel that 'A.I.' is going to be one of the most misunderstood films that has been released in a long while."

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